

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BONN 10272

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SUBJECT: HELMUT KOHL: THE MAN WHO COULD BE CHANCELLOR

REF: BONN 14579, SEPT. 1, 1976 (NOTAL)

BEGIN SUMMARY: HELMUT KOHL, LEADER OF THE JOINT CDU/CSU
BUNDESTAG CAUCUS, PLANS TO VISIT WASHINGTON SOMETIME
THIS FALL. HIS TRIP COMES AGAINST A BACKDROP OF EVENTS
WHICH SUGGEST THAT KOHL COULD BE THE NEXT CHANCELLOR OF
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THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY -- PERHAPS EVEN BEFORE
THE CURRENT LEGISLATIVE TERM ENDS IN 1980.

THOUGH WE SHALL NOT TRY TO ASSESS IN THIS MESSAGE
KOHL'S CHANCES TO BE CHANCELLOR THIS YEAR, NEXT YEAR, OR
IN 1980, OUR LOOK AT HIS PERSONALITY AND AT HIS RECORD
SUGGESTS THAT HE WOULD BE A COMPETENT AND REASONABLE

CHANCELLOR. HE WOULD NOT CUT A HEROIC FIGURE BUT WOULD TRY TO LEAD A REASONABLY COHESIVE TEAM ALONG THE PATH OF MAXIMUM CONSENSUS. HE WOULD PROBABLY CONTINUE THE BROAD LINES OF PRESENT GERMAN POLICY, INCLUDING A CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH THE UNITED STATES. HE WOULD PROBABLY BE MORE RESERVED EVEN THAN SCHMIDT IN HIS APPROACH TO DETENTE, AND MORE OPEN TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. HE WOULD TRY TO MAINTAIN THE HIGH LEVEL OF STABILITY, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC, WHICH HAS BEEN A HALLMARK OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC SINCE ITS BIRTH IN 1949. END SUMMARY.

1. THE SETTING FOR KOHL'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

THE VISIT THIS FALL OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BOTH SIDES: FOR KOHL, TO ESTABLISH THE BEGINNING OF A WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION; FOR WASHINGTON, TO DEVELOP A TIE WHICH COULD YIELD FUTURE DIVIDENDS. THE LEADER OF THE CDU/CSU OPPOSITION IN THE BUNDESTAG, KOHL HAS ONLY BEEN IN THE U.S. THREE TIMES: AS AN IVP GRANTEE IN 1967, AND AS CDU CHAIRMAN IN 1974 AND 1976. HIS ENGLISH IS LIMITED, BUT HE HAS READ WIDELY ABOUT OUR COUNTRY. HOWEVER, KOHL SUFFERS FROM A NAGGING SENSE THAT THE USG DOES NOT TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY, PARTICULARLY VIS-A-VIS CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT (THUS HIS CHAGRIN OVER THE DECISION BY VICE PRESIDENT MONDALE NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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TO MEET WITH HIM IN BONN LAST JANUARY). KOHL IS SENSITIVE TO SLIGHTS, REAL OR IMAGINED.

2. WE SHALL NOT ASSESS IN THIS REPORT KOHL'S PRECISE CHANCES TO BECOME CHANCELLOR. THAT WILL BE THE SUBJECT OF SUBSEQUENT MESSAGES. SUFFICE IT TO SAY THAT KOHL HAS GOOD PROSPECTS. HE HAS A FIRM GRIP ON HIS PARTY, DESPITE A LACKLUSTER PERFORMANCE TO DATE AS LEADER OF THE JOINT CDU/CSU BUNDESTAG FRAKTION. BARRING SOME SUDDEN AND UNEXPECTED CHANGE IN UNION FORTUNES IN THE 1978 LANDTAG ELECTIONS, WE BELIEVE THAT KOHL WILL STAY AT THE HELM THROUGH 1980. KOHL'S POSITION AS OPPOSITION LEADER IS FURTHER STRENGTHENED BY THE TIDE NOW RUNNING AGAINST THE RULING SOCIAL-LIBERAL COALITION. APPARENT GOVERNMENT WEAKNESS MAKES PLAIN THE NEED FOR A CHANCELLOR-IN-WAITING. WE HEDGE THIS FORECAST WITH ONE HISTORICAL NOTE: THE CDU USUALLY DUMPS ITS LOSERS -- ERHARD, KIESINGER, BARZEL -- WITH DISPATCH. HOWEVER, KOHL IS NOT YET SEEN AS A LOSER, BY VIRTUE OF HIS SUCCESS IN PRESIDING OVER THE UNION'S SECOND HIGHEST VOTE (48.5 PERCENT) IN HISTORY.

3. KOHL THE MAN: A PERSONAL AND POLITICAL PROFILE

KOHL, AT 47, IS A BOY WONDER OF GERMAN POLITICS, THOUGH HIS MANNER BELIES THE OVERT DRIVE AND AGGRESSIVENESS THAT GENERALLY MARK FAST-RISING STARS .

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HE HAS HAD A METEORIC CAREER WHICH HAS ACCUSTOMED HIM TO SUCCESS AND REINFORCED HIS CONGENITAL OPTIMISM AND SELF-CONFIDENCE. AT 28, KOHL WAS THE YOUNGEST LANDTAG (STATE PARLIAMENT) DEPUTY IN THE FRG; AT 33, THE YOUNGEST CHAIRMAN OF ANY LANDTAG CAUCUS; AT 36, THE YOUNGEST LEADER OF ANY CDU LE ORGANIZATION; AT 39, THE YOUNGEST MINISTER-

PRESIDENT IN THE FRG; AT 43, THE YOUNGEST CDU NATIONAL
CHAIRMAN; AND, AT 45, THE YOUNGEST CHANCELLOR-
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CANDIDATE EVER NOMINATED BY THE UNION. WITH SUCH A
RECORD, AND GIVEN HIS PARTY'S PENCHANT FOR DUMPING
LOSERS, KOHL ALMOST NEEDS TO BECOME CHANCELLOR TO AVOID
ACQUIRING HAS-BEEN STATUS EVEN BEFORE HE ISTPM

4. LIKE MANY PEOPLE WITH A REPUTATION FOR BEING UN-
COMPLICATED AND WITH A SUPERFICIALLY OPEN MANNER, KOHL
IS IN REALITY EXTREMELY COMPLEX. HE IS, AS MANY OF HIS
POLITICAL ENEMIES HAVE FOUND TO THEIR CHAGRIN, EASY TO
UNDERESTIMATE. AFTER REPEATED CONTACTS WITH HIM OVER THE
PAST SEVERAL YEARS, HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE CERTAIN BASIC
TRAITS CAN BE CLEARLY DISCERNED:

A. "WELTANSCHAUUNG"

A PRACTICING CATHOLIC, KOHL IS A MIXTURE OF
RHINELAND TOLERANCE AND STRONG MORAL PRINCIPLES. HE IS
OPEN AND FRIENDLY TO ALMOST ALL VISITORS AND
APPARENTLY AT EASE IN MOST SITUATIONS. HIS DIFFICULTIES
WITH HIS CDU COLLEAGUE, BIEDENKOPF, WERE CAUSED NOT
ONLY BECAUSE KOHL SAW BIEDENKOPF AS POLITICALLY DIS-
LOYAL BUT BECAUSE KOHL WAS MORALLY OFFENDED THAT
BIEDENKOPF WAS IN THE PROCESS OF LEAVING HIS WIFE AND
FOUR CHILDREN FOR ANOTHER WOMAN. KOHL IS BASICALLY A
CONSERVATIVE MAN WHO HOLDS TRADITIONAL GERMAN VALUES.
THESE VALUES HAVE POLITICAL UTILITY IN THAT THEY FIND
CONSIDERABLE RESONANCE AMONG VOTERS, BUT KOHL HOLDS
THEM OUT OF CONVICTION RATHER THAN EXPEDIENCY. HE
FEELS STRONGLY ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN
GERMAN SOCIETY AND HE TRIES, DESPITE THE HEAVY DEMANDS
ON HIS TIME, TO PLAY THE ROLE OF A GOOD FATHER AND
HUSBAND. HE ALSO BELIEVES THAT LEGITIMATE GERMAN
PATRIOTISM HAS BEEN SHORT CHANGED IN THE POST-WAR
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POLITICAL CLIMATE.

B. STRENGTHS

KOHL HAS THE FUNDAMENTAL STRENGTH OF A GENUINE
MAN OF THE PEOPLE. HE IS GREGARIOUS, OPEN, FREE AND
WINNING IN HIS MANNER. HE DOES NOT, THEREFORE, MATCH THE

GRIM AND STEELY IMAGE OF SUCH CLASSICAL GERMAN CHANCELLOR FIGURES AS BISMARCKOR ADENAUER. INSTEAD, HIS LEADERSHIP STYLE WHEN IN OFFICE HAS BEEN TO DELEGATE AND TO COORDINATE, SETTING THE GENERAL TONE WHILE LEAVING MANY DECISIONS TO OTHERS. KOHL PRIDES HIMSELF ON HIS ABILITY TO INTEGRATE CONFLICTING VIEWS, TO RECONCILE DIFFERENCES, AND TO FORM COHESIVE TEAMS OUT OF APPARENTLY DISPARATE ELEMENTS. HE SEES THIS AS THE HIGHEST FORM OF POLITICAL ART. THUS, HE INSPIRES APPARENTLY GENUINE AFFECTION AND LOYALTY AMONG MANY COLLABORATORS.

C. WEAKNESSES

THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE COIN, OF COURSE, IS THAT KOHL DOES NOT HAVE THAT INSTINCT FOR THE JUGULAR WHICH OFTEN MARKS SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL FIGURES. CRITICS CHARGE THAT HIS TALENT FOR COMPROMISE HAS LED KOHL TO SEARCH FOR CONCILIATION WHEN HE SHOULD CONFRONT AND DEFEAT HIS OPPONENTS. FOR EXAMPLE, LAST WINTER, AFTER THE CSU TRIED AND FAILED TO FORM A SEPARATE BUNDESTAG CAUCUS, KOHL DID NOT HAVE THE STOMACH FULLY TO EXPLOIT HIS VICTORY IN ORDER TO CRIPPLE FRANZ-JOSEF STRAUSS' POLITICAL POWER. ANOTHER CASE INVOLVES BERLIN. THOUGH KOHL HAS CONFIDED TO CLOSE FRIENDS THAT THE CDU LEADERSHIP IN BERLIN IS TERRIBLE, HE HAS NOT FORCED THE OUSTER OF ITS INEFFECTIVE FIGURES.

THUS, WHILE PEOPLE LAUD KOHL'S CAPACITY TO
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INSPIRE FRIENDSHIP AND LOYALTY, THEY CRITICIZE HIM FOR HIS LACK OF COMMAND, AND FOR A COMRADELY STYLE THAT DOES NOT INSTILL FEAR IN THE HEARTS OF HIS OPPONENTS.

WE ALSO NOTE THAT THE STRENGTHS WHICH UNDERLAY

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KOHL'S EXECUTIVE SUCCESS IN MAINZ HAVE NOT SERVED HIM
WELL TO DATE IN LEADING THE UNRULY JOINT CDU/CSU
FRAKTION. THEY MAY ALSO NOT SUFFICE TO MAKE HIM A
SUCCESSFUL CHANCELLOR.

D. INTELLECTUAL TALENTS

THE MOST FREQUENT CHARGE MADE AGAINST KOHL IS
THAT HE IS NOT VERY BRIGHT. MOREOVER, KOHL'S SPEAKING
STYLE EASILY EXPOSES HIM TO SUCH A CHARGE. HIS PRO-
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PENSITY ALWAYS TO REACHSWELL-WORN CLICHE,
PARTICULARLY IN HIS PUBLIC SPEECHES, LEADS MANY TO WRITE
HIM OFF INTELLECTUALLY.

THIS JUDGMENT IS FALSE IN THE SENSE THAT KOHL IS

AN INTELLIGENT, EVEN THOUGHTFUL MAN, MORE ARTICULATE IN ONE-TO-ONE CONVERSATIONS THAN BEFORE A CROWD OR ON TV. HOWEVER, HE DOES NOT LIKE TO DO THE SUBSTANTIVE HOMEWORK NECESSARY TO MAKE HIMSELF WELL-INFORMED ABOUT COMPLEX SUBJECTS, AND HE PREFERS TO WING IT WHEN HE IS NOT PREPARED. KOHL'S DESCRIPTION OF HIMSELF DURING THE 1976 ELECTION CAMPAIGN AS A "GENERALIST" WAS VIEWED BY MANY CRITICS AS AN ATTEMPT TO: (1) WARD OFF DIFFICULT SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS AND (2) MAKE A VIRTUE OUT OF NECESSITY. IN A COUNTRY THAT VALUES EXPERTISE SO HIGHLY, THE DESCRIPTION "GENERALIST" IS PEJORATIVE. IT IS THIS LABEL, WITH ITS IMPLICATION OF INCAPABILITY TO DEAL WITH COMPLEX ISSUES, THAT MOST SERIOUSLY DAMAGES KOHL'S IMAGE IN COMPARISON WITH THAT OF THE CHANCELLOR.

E. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

ALTHOUGH KOHL HAS A WELL-EARNED REPUTATION FOR BEING GENEROUS TO HIS STAFF, HE IS NOT ABOVE EGO-TRIPPING. UNLIKE CHANCELLOR SCHMIDT, HE REQUIRES AN ENTOURAGE AT ALL TIMES AND HE SURROUNDS HIMSELF WITH A YOUNG STAFF WHICH IS LOYAL BUT LACKS THE POLITICAL WEIGHT TO BE CONSTRUCTIVELY CRITICAL. HE IS (LIKE MOST POLITICIANS, CONTRARY TO MYTH) THIN-SKINNED AND DOES NOT TAKE CRITICISM WELL. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HIS SUPREME - SELF-CONFIDENCE, PARTLY THE RESULT THAT HE TOWERS PHYSICALLY OVER MOST PEOPLE, COVERS UP DEEP CONFIDENTIAL

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INSECURITIES.

5. KOHL AS CHANCELLOR: A PROGNOSIS

WEIGHING THESE QUALITIES, WE BELIEVE THAT KOHL WOULD BE A POPULAR AND COMPETENT CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ALBEIT NOT IN THE INNOVATIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL TRADITION OF KONRAD ADENAUER OR WILLY BRANDT. IT MAY BE THAT NO POLITICAL PARTY IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC, AT THIS POINT IN HISTORY AT LEAST, CAN OFFER A CHANCELLOR-CANDIDATE OF THAT STATURE. IN FACT, ONE OF KOHL'S ASSETS MAY BE THAT THE GERMAN PEOPLE WANT A PERIOD OF CALM AFTER THE TURBULENCE OF THE PAST DECADE.

A MAJOR QUESTION MARK THAT NOW HANGS OVER KOHL IS THAT, TO DATE, HE HAS NOT BEEN FULLY TESTED: I.E., HE HAS NOT HAD TO COPE WITH MAJOR NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS AS HEAD OF GOVERNMENT. IT IS THUS DIFFICULT TO JUDGE WHETHER KOHL AS CHANCELLOR WOULD BE DECISIVE ENOUGH AND DILIGENT ENOUGH TO MASTER THE COMPLEX

PROBLEMS FACING THE FRG IN THE YEARS AHEAD.
THE FACT IS THAT NO ONE, AS EVEN HIS FRIENDS ADMIT, CAN
ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS UNTIL KOHL HAS HAD THE CHANCE TO
SHOW HIS METTLE IN THE TOP POLITICAL JOB IN THE FRG.

6. IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT, LIKE HARRY TRUMAN, KOHL
MIGHT GROW IN THE TOP JOB. IN MANY
WAYS, IT IS EASIER TO LEAD A PARTY WHICH IS GOVERNING
THAN A PARTY WHICH IS IN OPPOSITION, GIVEN THE TOOLS AN
INCUMBENT HAS TO ENFORCE DISCIPLINE AND SET POLICY
DIRECTION. KOHL'S PERFORMANCE AS MINISTER-PRESIDENT OF
RHINELAND-PALATINATE AUGURS WELL FOR HIS POTENTIAL AS
/EDERAL CHANCELLOR. IN MAINZ, HE SURROUNDED HIMSELF
WITH AN EXCELLENT CABINET, DELEGATED AUTHORITY, AND
SUCCESSFULLY FOUGHT HIS PROGRAMS THROUGH THE LEGISLATURE.
GRANTED THAT MANY PROBLEMS IN BONN ARE CONSIDERABLY MORE
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DIFFICULT, AND THAT A BONN CABINET WOULD SURELY CONTAIN
SERIOUS RIVALS, NEVERTHELESS THE TALENTS AND SKILLS KOHL
HAS DEMONSTRATED IN THE PAST SHOULD SERVE HIM WELL AS
BUNDESKANZLER.

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7. FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF IMMEDIATE USG INTERESTS, KOHL AS CHANCELLOR WOULD SEEK TO CONTINUE A CLOSE BILATERAL WORKING RELATIONSHIP. HIS EMOTIONAL TIES TO THE U.S. ARE ALREADY STRONG. KOHL IS IRREVOCABLY PRO-NATO; HE BELIEVES IN A STRONG WESTERN DEFENSE EFFORT; HE FEARS THE EROSION OF RESOLVE IN THE WEST EUROPEAN CAMP AS A RESULT OF EUROCOMMUNISM; AND HIS POLITICAL AND PERSONAL VALUES ARE WHOLLY COMPATIBLE WITH OUR OWN.

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8. MOREOVER, KOHL HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FRIEND OF THE U.S. HE OFTEN SPEAKS OF HIS GREAT AFFECTION FOR OUR COUNTRY WHICH DATES FROM THE MARSHALL PLAN DAYS. HE RECALLS WITH OBVIOUS EMOTION THAT HE WAS WEARING A "CARE" SUIT, SENT FROM THE UNITED STATES, WHEN HE MET HIS WIFE-TO-BE AT A DANCE. HE PRIDES HIMSELF ON HAVING KEPT HIS FAITH IN AMERICA DURING THE LONG YEARS WHEN VIET NAM AND WATERGATE MADE SUCH SENTIMENTS UNPOPULAR IN SOME FRG CIRCLES. AS MINISTER-PRESIDENT OF RHINELAND-PALATINATE, KOHL LAUNCHED A FORWARD-LOOKING PROGRAM FOR U.S. TROOPS STATIONED THERE. AS LEADER OF ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST IMPORTANT ALLIES, HE WOULD IN ALL LIKELIHOOD REMAIN WELL DISPOSED TOWARD U.S. SECURITY REQUIREMENTS AND VIEWS.

9. AT THE SAME TIME, A CHANCELLOR KOHL WOULD JEALOUSLY PROTECT GERMAN INTERESTS AS HE PERCEIVES THEM. ON OCCASION HE WOULD HAVE TO BOW TO PRESSURE WITHIN HIS OWN PARTY TO TAKE POSITIONS CONTRARY TO USG INTERESTS, AS HE HAS ALREADY DONE ON SOME QUESTIONS OF NUCLEAR

PROLIFERATION (E.G., THE BRAZIL DEAL). YET, THE OUT-LOOK IS THAT ANY FRG CHANCELLOR, REGARDLESS OF PARTY, WILL HENCEFORTH STRIKE A MORE INDEPENDENT POSE VIS-A-VIS THE USG. WE HAVE ALREADY SEEN THIS BEGIN TO HAPPEN UNDER SCHMIDT. NEITHER SCHMIDT NOR KOHL IS PERSONALLY BURDENED BY THE GERMAN PAST. EACH IS SURROUNDED IN HIS IMMEDIATE OFFICE BY BRIGHT YOUNG MEN WHO FEEL NO SENSE OF PERSONAL GUILT OR SHAME AT THE NAZI EXPERIENCE, AND WHO BELIEVE THAT THE FRG HAS WORKED LONG AND HARD TO DESERVE FULLY THE PLACE IT NOW HOLDS IN THE WORLD.

10. FINALLY, AN IMPORTANT FACT TO KEEP IN MIND IS THAT THE PARAMETERS OF FRG POLITICS ARE FAIRLY WELL FIXED. A CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT DOES NOT USUALLY LEAD TO SWEEPING
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CHANGES IN FRG POLICIES, PARTICULARLY IN DOMESTIC POLICIES. WHILE THE JURY MUST REMAIN OUT UNTIL FURTHER EVIDENCE IS IN, ALL PRESENT SIGNS SUGGEST THAT, COMPARED TO THE PRESENT SOCIAL-LIBERAL COALITION, A GOVERNMENT LED BY HELMUT KOHL WOULD BE MORE CONSERVATIVE IN FISCAL MATTERS, MORE SKEPTICAL IN RELATIONS WITH EASTERN EUROPE AND THE SOVIET UNION, AND MORE FAVORABLE TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION. ALL THAT SAID, THE DIFFERENCE WOULD BE ONE OF DEGREE AND NOT OF KIND.
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